
Panama dilemma: Washington doesn't know if leak was 'theft,' but approves of 'independent journos'

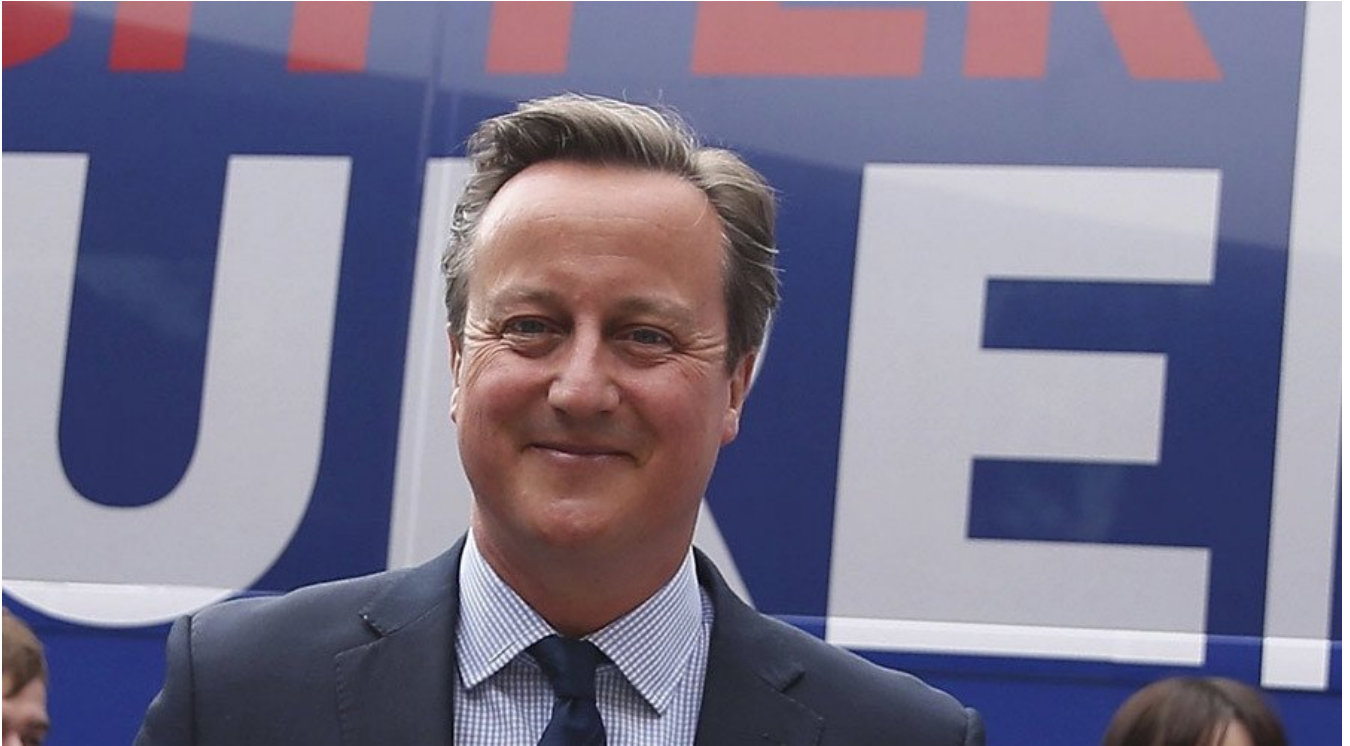
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US State Department spokesperson Mark Toner on Thursday appeared to be seriously confused as to what stance to take in respect of the Panama leaks, with the investigative reporting group that released them partially funded by the American government via the USAID agency.

When AP reporter Matt Lee asked if the US government sees the documents published by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) as stolen, Toner dodged the question, saying it was for the *"Panamanian legal system or legal process to decide on."*

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Toner was then asked a seemingly simple yes-or-no question: *"If someone comes across hundreds of thousands of pages of confidential documents and publishes them, and they were clearly not meant to be seen by the public, you don't think that that's theft?"*

The spokesperson wasn't also able to produce a coherent reply, saying that he *"can't speak at this time...whether this was theft or not."*

Lee also reminded Toner of the hard stance the US government has taken towards Chelsea Manning, who was accused *"of aiding the enemy"* and given 35 years behind bars under the Espionage Act. He also pointed to the case of Edward Snowden, whom Washington has demanded to be extradited for prosecution over the biggest US intelligence leak in history.

WikiLeaks has accused the US government of being partly involved in the Panama Papers release as through USAID it funded the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), one of the groups that produced the leak. The whistleblowing website noted the fact that the OCCRP *"targets Russia & [the] former USSR,"* and that it turns out that Washington and George Soros paid the group to target Russia and President Vladimir Putin.

The Obama administration has been cautious in its reaction to the massive leak of documents, which exposed the tax haven and dozens of influential players involved. Overall, it appears that Washington has welcomed the report as a good deed which, in the State Department's words, *"can shine a light on corruption."*

Having distanced the US from the leak, Toner would not deny America's funding for the OCCRP.

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"It's part of our – a core tenet of our foreign policy that we support organizations that go after corruption," he said at the briefing.

"Obviously, these are the kind of organizations that USAID has and continues to fund," Toner said, adding that the US is not seeking to go after anyone in particular.

While the State Department calls the leak *"independent journalism,"* the Panama-based law firm Mossack Fonseca, which lost hold of 11.5 million sensitive documents, has labeled it *"a hack."* In the low-tech world a hack, or an unlawful seizure of data, simply means a theft – something not so apparent to Washington.

'Panama Papers not transparent, no one knows who the leaker is' – ex-FBI agent to RT

There is still much secrecy surrounding the Panama Papers, Coleen Rowley, a former FBI agent and whistleblower, told RT. She compared the leaks made by the NSA whistleblower Snowden, which were *"completely transparent,"* to the *"secret"* Panama Papers.

"In this case the greatest secrecy right now is that no one knows who the leaker could be, no one knows his identity," she said.

Rowley added that she hopes that the reporters who leaked the information *"would fairly apply the standards ... and will reveal more information about different powerful public figures from around the world."*

"Secrecy is always pernicious. And it is pernicious whether it's a ...criminal carrying on his activities or whether it's a powerful institution or even a government."

Rowley believes that the ideal solution would be *"to lower the level of secrecy [about the Panama Papers] and regulate these shell companies and tax havens."*

"The hypocrisy is that the US is one of the easiest places to create havens to hide taxes," she stressed.
